

# **Trapped by inflexible mechanisms. Commentary on Martell, C. (1972). Age of creative insecurity: Student-centered learning.**

*Journal of Education for Librarianship*, 15(2), 112–120.

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Student-centered learning was the pedagogical approach that was tried but found wanting in Charles Martell's classroom; the experience which he describes in his 1972 JELIS article. Persuaded by research accounts (Killman, 1972) that student-centered teaching was more effective in stimulating critical thinking, he sought to apply it to enhance graduate education in library and information science (LIS).

Martell argues:

Trapped by inflexible mechanisms, many institutions are unable to adapt smoothly to the changing expectations and needs of their clients. Our educational system is particularly out-of-synch. Student-centered teaching—participative education—through unstructuring is one method for encouraging a flexible, creative, classroom environment. However, as this article points out, grades as the criteria for success, the learned need for predictability, the tendency to reward conformity, and inexperience in group decision-making techniques have hindered the development of student centered learning. (p. 112)

The problems he pinpointed were: a “trapped” or inflexible and “out-of-synch” educational system, the need to “adapt... to the . . . changing expectations and needs of their clients,” and to respond to:

“Education, like fresh rolls, goes stale. And

in today’s Knowledge Society, the problem is not getting new information: it is developing new ways to learn, and to apply new knowledge.” (*Saturday Review/Education*, 1972, p. 17)

Convinced that LIS students would benefit from a new approach to learning, Martell introduced student-centered learning into his library management course. However, he abandoned his endeavor after three weeks when he observed that “his efforts to elicit student participation were not producing the desired effect” (p. 114). Although he states that his intent was to examine why his class was “unable to take advantage of the opportunity to govern itself” (p. 115), there is no such data provided, but rather, he offers a guide for instructors considering the use of student-centered learning. Furthermore, he attributes the failure of LIS students to thrive in an unstructured, participative classroom because they have the personality traits of professional librarians who value authority and are resistant to change.

Martell’s intention was to address an entrenched practice he viewed as problematic. As a descriptive case study, the initiative had problems in implementation. These include absence of evidence that the students or his school were trapped in an inflexible system, were not learning as they should, or had needs to learn in a new way in order to apply new knowledge.

Areas that would need to be addressed should the study be repeated are to gather baseline measures (i.e., determine what issues exist and the extent of the problem), to implement new pedagogy for sufficient time to allow for adoption of innovation, and to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to determine effect on learning. Martell appears to have terminated his study prematurely and the students that the intervention was meant to help were blamed for lack of its adoption. He also appeared to make no attempt to inquire about their experience and perspectives on student-centered learning. The intent was to engage a new learning process but there was no process to learn why it did not take hold. This is ironic because in his suggestions to guide teachers considering student-centered learning, the last one is:

**10. Learn together. Joy is in the act, not the re-act.**

Student-centered learning has evolved since 1972, and has become the norm in many countries at all levels of education, including LIS programs. Although this may be the case, Martell's concern with the education requirements of graduate students and of the need to employ new ways to teach and learn can be challenging to implement in higher education. The difficulty starts with the lack of training that faculty receive during their doctoral education, the degree that is usually expected for a faculty member in North America and elsewhere. Learning to teach has not traditionally been a requirement in doctoral studies. While this is an obvious gap in preparing for teaching, doctoral students interested in learning to become effective educators can find at their universities no shortage of pedagogy and instructional design courses or teaching and learning resources. Although faculty may not have extensive teacher preparation teaching is a faculty responsibility. It is expected that faculty are able to articulate their teaching philosophy and provide evidence of effective teaching for promotion and tenure

(i.e., job performance). To this end course evaluations and peer reviews of teaching are used as evaluation tools. These evaluations tend to be summative but faculty can also employ formative methods to introduce changes during a teaching period to enhance the learning experience of the students they have at the moment. This may be more valuable than waiting to make changes for a future class. Formative evaluation includes coaching, video-recording for self-reflection, and plus/delta (also known as plus/change) feedback from students and/or peers.

Martell's concerns regarding learning is central to the mission of ALISE. ALISE provides several channels for disseminating teaching methods, its annual conference, its webinars, and *JELIS*, its peer-reviewed journal. Effective learning methods need to be constantly revisited as the environment to teach graduate LIS students is increasingly more online, technological, diverse and global. One such example are MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). It is also recommended that doctoral programs incorporate pedagogy and instructional design in the coursework of future faculty.

It is vital that we create dynamic and effective learning communities. LIS instructors need to understand the social context and educational experiences of their students. They also need to articulate their teaching philosophy and recognize that there isn't one pedagogical approach for all classrooms. Most importantly we need to reinforce the notion that the best learning occurs when it is understood that it is a process and not an end in itself. And we need to remember that learning communities are productive when all are both teachers and learners. To that end Charles Martell inspires us.

## References

Killman, R.H. (1974) Participative Management of the College Classroom, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 59(3), 337–338.  
*Saturday Review: Education* (1972, Dec), 55(45).